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I. GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECIDES TO INCLUDE THE BETHLEHEM 2000 PROJECT IN THE AGENDA OF ITS FIFTY-THIRD SESSION

At its third plenary meetings, on 15 September 1998, the General Assembly considered the agenda item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" and decided to include it in the agenda of its fifty-third session under agenda item 157 (see GA/9436). On 11 September 1998, the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People made a statement before the General Committee on the item. The full text is reproduced below:

Mr. President,

Allow me to express my sincere congratulations on your election to the important post of President of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly.

I am honoured to take the floor as representative of Senegal, the country that has held the chairmanship of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People since its inception. Together with my colleagues in the Bureau of the Committee, we have requested the inclusion of this important item on "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the fifty-third session.

The town of Bethlehem in Palestine has for nearly two millennia been a beacon of peace and reconciliation and of hope in a better future for mankind. Beginning next year, people from all over the world will visit Bethlehem to celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the onset of the new millennium. The celebration is of monumental importance, not only to Palestinians and for the region, but also for believers from all over the world and for the international community as a whole. The Palestinian Authority, under the leadership of Chairman Yasser Arafat, has decided to honour this celebration by launching the Bethlehem 2000 project. At the United Nations Conference in Support for the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People held in Brussels earlier this year, Chairman Arafat expressed the hope that this great religious and historic occasion would be a new beginning full of love and peace for our world, for all mankind, and would bring forth a new chapter for the Palestinian people.

Allow me to draw your attention to document A/53/141 issued on 15 May 1998, which contains our request and an explanatory memorandum indicating the reasons for the Committee's decision to support wholeheartedly the Palestinian Authority in this endeavour and to request the inclusion of this item in the agenda of the fifty-third session.

It is envisaged hat the commemoration will begin at Christmas 1999 and conclude at Easter 2001. With an expected two million visitors travelling to Bethlehem for the occasion, the project focuses on activities that will help ensure the success of this huge undertaking. Activities include the holding of international cultural celebrations; the rehabilitation and upgrading of the town's infrastructure; the upgrading of basic social, health, security services; the preservation of the rich Palestinian history; and provision of all necessary tourism services.

The success of this endeavour requires a high degree of engagement of the international community in organizing and preparing for the occasion, including financial and technical contributions to the preparations and actual participation in the commemorative events and activities. It is encouraging to note that the European Commission, UNDP, UNESCO, the World Bank as well as donor Governments are already engaged in various projects in connection with Bethlehem 2000. At the same time, it is essential that the United Nations as a whole should display explicit interest and support for this historic occasion, drawing the attention of the peoples of the world to its importance and assisting in making the event a moment for hope, peace, coexistence and prosperity for all humankind.

The Committee earnestly hopes that a constructive debate will take place in the interest of these worthwhile objectives and that wide consultation will pave the way for the unanimous adoption of a General Assembly resolution in this regard. I therefore strongly urge the General Committee to recommend the inclusion of the item "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly. Thank you.

II. SECRETARY-GENERAL AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT ISSUE STATEMENTS ON THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI TALKS

The following is a statement issued on 23 October 1998 by the Spokesman for Secretary-General Kofi Annan (see SG/SM/6769):

I am delighted at the news that an impasse in the Middle East peace process has finally been broken. This is a big step. I congratulate Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Netanyahu for having had the courage to make the compromises necessary for peace.

I would also like to pay tribute to President Clinton, King Hussein and all those who put in so much effort to make this achievement possible.

I hope that this will lead to renewed efforts to conclude a comprehensive peace for the region as a whole.

The following is a statement issued on 23 October 1998 by the Spokesman for the President of the General Assembly, Didier Opertti (Uruguay) (see GA/SM/71):

The entire international community is sharing at this moment a unanimous sentiment of deep satisfaction and joy at the results of the talks between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Mr. Arafat, under the auspices and direct participation of the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, as well as the participation of King Hussein of Jordan. The implementation of the agreement that they reached will eliminate some of the most important obstacles and encourages us to hope that in the near future, the Israeli and Palestinian peoples will be able to engage fully in the task of consolidating and enjoying a peace obtained as a result of such hard efforts.

I congratulate all the parties involved in the work towards this long-awaited historic agreement, which constitutes the most eloquent testimony to the courage, spirit of conciliation and high political vision of those who participated in its creation.

III. PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION ISSUES STATEMENT ON THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

The following is a statement by the European Union Presidency issued on 28 October 1998 (see A/53/555):

The European Union warmly welcomes the signing in Washington on 23 October 1998 of the Wye River Memorandum between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Chairman Yasser Arafat. The European Union congratulates Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat for their courage and sense of responsibility and pays tribute to the important contribution of President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright to this successful outcome, as also to the personal support lent by King Hussein of Jordan. This breakthrough opens the door to the early resumption of the negotiations on permanent status as foreseen in the Oslo Accords, as well as to the implementation of outstanding commitments under the Interim Agreement.

The European Union welcomes this forward movement in the peace process and looks forward to the speedy implementation of the Agreement. It recognizes that this will require a sustained political commitment by the parties and the determination to resist extremists and others wishing to frustrate progress towards peace.

The European Union now calls upon the parties to complete negotiations as soon as possible on those remaining issues under the Interim Agreement which have still not been settled, to start negotiations without delay on final status and, at the same time, to avoid all unilateral acts which could prejudice the final outcome, thus building confidence, which is essential for a lasting peace in the region. It attaches importance also to the early revival of the Syrian and Lebanese tracks in order to arrive at a comprehensive settlement among all parties to the conflict.

The European Union reiterates its firm commitment to a just and comprehensive settlement in the Middle East based on the Madrid and Oslo accords. It welcomes the continuing positive contribution being made by its Special Envoy, Ambassador Moratinos. The European Union has much to offer to the success of the peace process and is determined to continue playing its full part, enhancing it in all its aspects. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of a sound economy to social and political stability among the Palestinian people, the European Union will continue its considerable economic and technical assistance and looks to Israel to meet its responsibilities in promoting the conditions for economic development.

IV. EXCERPTS FROM THE MINISTERIAL DECLARATION OF THE GROUP OF 77 AND CHINA ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

At its 22nd annual meeting held at United Nations Headquarters on 25 September 1998, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Group of 77 and China adopted its Ministerial Declaration. Relevant excerpts are reproduced below (see A/53/466):

Critical situation in the Middle East

62. The Ministers expressed their concern over the deteriorating economic and social situation of the Palestinian people as a result of the continued illegal Israeli policies and actions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, particularly settlement activities, the closure of the Palestinian territory and the withholding of Palestinian revenues. In this context, the Ministers stressed the need to preserve the territorial integrity of all of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, to guarantee the freedom of movement of persons and goods, and to respect the fundamental human rights of the Palestinian people. The Ministers re-emphasized the need for international assistance to support Palestinian development efforts in the economic and social fields, and called on the international donor community to deliver the financial assistance pledged to the Palestinian Authority.

63. The Ministers expressed their deep concern at the stalled peace process in the Middle East and the persistence of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, and the other Arab territories, which gravely deteriorate the living conditions of the Arab population under occupation, as well as negatively affecting the national efforts to achieve sustained economic growth and sustainable development in the region. They further expressed grave concern over the escalating Israeli policies of building and expanding settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan, in violation of international law, relevant United Nations resolutions and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949. They reaffirmed their support to the Palestinian people in their effort to achieve their inalienable rights, including their right to establish an independent State on their national soil, including Jerusalem. They also reaffirmed their support for the Middle East peace process, aimed at achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the region on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) and the principle of land for peace. In this context the Ministers urgently called for the implementation of the agreements reached and international support to reactivate and complete the peace process from the point where it was stopped, emphasizing the necessity to respect all agreements, pledges and commitments reached during the previous stage of the peace talks. The Ministers reaffirmed further the permanent responsibility of the United Nations towards the question of Palestine and called upon Israel to comply with all relevant United Nations resolutions and to put an end to its occupation of Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, and the other Arab territories including the Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon.